

**"Everyone was very somber that morning ... Right off, we knew that at least 27 were dead."**  
*David Tunstall, former Joliet Arsenal public relations officer*



An aerial view of 23,500-acre ordnance plant shows the magnitude of the destruction, while the view on the ground illustrated the completeness of it.

# Joliet arsenal disaster still is burned into his memory

**D**avid Tunstall stood there at that place with his memories on fast rewind. The minutes, hours and days from 55 years ago flashed through his mind. His expression was grim.

The ground at that spot, though now deserted and covered with weeds, is soaked with the vibrations of the past.

And the 88-year-old Tunstall was there when it happened. He remembers it all. He was Capt. Tunstall then, the U.S. Army's public relations officer at the Joliet Arsenal.

He was the official military spokesman on that Friday morning when everyone in this area was awakened by two loud blasts: at 2:42 a.m. June 5, 1942.

"The blasts were followed by this instantaneous breeze that blew in through my windows," Tunstall said.

Living on the arsenal's military post with his wife and two children, Tunstall immediately realized that some kind of horrible accident had happened at the ordnance plant. He knew that people were dead; that reporters would be calling him with questions.

The captain quickly dressed and waited for his phone to ring. The first call came from Gene Griffin, a reporter at *The Herald News*. Then more reporters called. He told them to go to the Joliet police station while he gathered the facts about what had happened. Within a couple of hours, the media was allowed through the arsenal's main gate.

"We had bacon and eggs waiting for them in the cafeteria," Tunstall said. "I explained the situation."

By a little after 5 a.m., the reporters knew how many arsenal workers were missing and presumed dead. But those numbers were slightly high. The first headline in this newspaper stated, "56 dead or missing, 41 hurt in Elwood ordnance blast."

Some of the missing men were accounted for later that morning. By the next day, the number of dead was fixed at 48. That's how many were working in the building where anti-tank mines were being prepared to load on to box cars.

Four box cars sitting on rails beside the building were partially loaded with mines. Two of these box cars were in the sec-



**John Whiteside**

ond of those two rapid explosions that morning.

"Everyone was very somber that morning," Tunstall said, recalling how he sent his assistant, a lieutenant, out to compile the numbers to give to reporters. "Right off, we knew that at least 27 were dead."

His main job that morning was to stop all the wild rumors. Many people outside the arsenal grounds thought the whole ordnance complex, which included hundreds of buildings, had exploded. But most of the ordnance-producing buildings were spread out with a half mile in between them just in case something like this happened.

Tunstall didn't see the explosion site until about the second or third day.

"I remember the big holes," he said. "Big holes about 10 to 12 feet deep."

By then, all of the body parts of the workers had been found. Of the 48 men who died, 12 were never found. They had been blown to bits in the rubble and dust inside and around those big holes in the ground.

Tunstall said the Army sent a general from Washington, D.C., to head up the official investigation. But the emphasis at the arsenal was to get back into full production. The bombs and ammunition made there were needed in the war effort.

"We all wondered what effect this would have on the war," Tunstall said. "There was nothing we could do about what had already happened. We had to move on."

During the few days that followed the explosion, Tunstall fielded media calls from all over the nation. He was the official spokesman.

But from the very beginning, the investigators felt it had been an accident, he said. They never believed that the explosion had been caused by enemy sabotage.

He said investigators determined there were hundreds of mines in the box cars, with even more of the anti-tank mines inside the building. Each mine contained TNT. The investigators believed that a worker had dropped a mine fuse, which had set off the explosions.

That same June 5th day was the first birthday of Tunstall's son, Dan. The baby was supposed to have a birthday party. But his daddy was mighty busy that day.

The arsenal commander would later say that production at the plant was only reduced 15 percent by the damage. Within 30 days, the plant was back into full production.

Tunstall, who spent three years living and working at the arsenal, went back for a visit at my request. He viewed a series of 30 black and white slides that showed the damage caused by the explosion.

One slide was of those big holes that he remembered.

Then we drove to the site of the explosion. Another building had been constructed there shortly after the explosion. Production of the wartime ammunition had to move on 55 years ago.

Tunstall walked through the old building. He was quiet with his memories. But outside in the sunlight a slight smile broke through on his elderly face. I asked him what he was thinking about.

"I remember a little black and white dog, its name was Terry," he said. "A woman gave it to my boys to play with when we lived here."

He was quiet for a few seconds and then added, "There are so many memories here. So many memories."



The explosion that ripped through the Elwood Ordnance Plant on June 5, 1942, left 48 dead and a dozen or so injured also sent some 20,000 other workers into bomb shelters.